

True Reformer Building  
1200 U Street, N.W.  
Washington  
District of Columbia

HABS No, DC-362

HABS,  
DC,  
WASH,  
234 -

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. DC-362

## TRUE REFORMER BUILDING

- Location: 1200 U Street, NW (southwest corner of U and Twelfth Streets, NW), Washington, D.C.
- USGS Washington West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.324130.4309280.
- Present Owner: Gary H. Lebbin, 10410 Tucker Street, Beltsville, Maryland (1979).
- Present Use: Commercial.
- Significance: The True Reformer Building was probably the first building in the United States to have gone through all of the design, financing, and construction processes using only the talents and resources of the black community. It was designed by John A. Lankford, the first twentieth century black professional architect in the District of Columbia. The building itself is representative of turn-of-the-century fraternal mutual aid organizations which have been described by the historian August Meier [in his Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1963), p. 137] as second only to churches as important centers for racial self-help and cooperation in that racially difficult era. The dignified four story building also represents the Afro-American's contribution to monumental architecture at the time public and private Washington was being revitalized as a result of the McMillan Commission proposals.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Construction apparently began in 1902 when, according to the Washington Bee newspaper of July 12, the architect's drawings had been "submitted to the Engineer's Department of the District Government and have been fully approved." On July 15, 1903, the building was dedicated (W. P. Burrell, Twenty-Five Years History of the Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers, 1881-1905, p. 319).
2. Architect: John A. Lankford. Born in Potosi, Missouri, in 1874, he arrived in Washington in 1902 to design the True Reformer Building. Thus began a long career as the first twentieth-century professional black architect in the nation's capital. He also worked as a building contractor, and thus Lankford's career marked the transition between previous times when blacks had typically performed

architectural functions as skilled craftsmen or as contractors, and the future when well-trained architects would specialize only in design.

Lankford's education was basically that of the trade school, and he was educated at a number of places, including Lincoln Institute in Missouri and Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. His early career coincided with the racially tense years in which Booker T. Washington urged blacks to help each other as a way of combatting the economic, social and political proscription of blacks. Accordingly, most of Lankford's commissions were generated within the black community. He began the tradition (followed by most of his black successors who practiced architecture in Washington) of using the nation's capital as the seat of a lucrative national practice with an emphasis on church, fraternal and academic designs.

Lankford's address on "The Negro as an Architect and Builder," delivered to the national convention of the National Negro Business League in 1906, was probably the first systematic analysis of the contributions and role of blacks in architecture. He became in 1925 the first black registered architect in the District of Columbia. He died in 1946.

3. Original and subsequent owners:

Feb. 26, 1902 Liber 2642, Folio 41	Wilson C. Thompson et ux to Reformer's Mercantile and Industrial Association, Inc. (popularly known as The True Reformers). In the years following a series of Trustees were appointed.
May 2, 1914 Liber 3693 Folios 357, 360 and 364	The True Reformers having gone bankrupt, the property was sold at auction to John W. Lewis, president of the Industrial Savings Bank, a Negro bank of Washington.
Jan. 4, 1915 Liber 3749 Folios 487, 489, and 490	Through a series of transactions, Lewis placed the property in the hands of the Laborers and Mechanics Realty Co., of which he was a trustee.
Jan. 11, 1914 Liber 3955 Folio 38	Property deeded to Trustees of the Knights of Pythias of North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia, Jurisdiction of the District of Columbia.

May 1, 1934 Liber 6801 Folio 31	Because of default of a Trust, property deeded to National Savings and Trust Co.
Jan. 4, 1938 Liber 7186 Folio 503	National Savings and Trust Co. sold the property to the Boys Club of the Metropolitan Police of the District of Columbia.
Nov. 19, 1959 Liber 11342 Folio 363	Boys Club of the Metropolitan Police sold the property to Gary H. Lebbin, et ux, Joint Tenants (40% interest), et al.

4. Builder: Bolling and Everett of Lynchburg, Va. S. H. Bolling and A. J. Everett joined together for the construction of the True Reformer Building. They also combined to construct in 1907 the Negro Exposition Building (designed by William Sidney Pittman, a Negro architect) at the Jamestown Tricentennial Exposition. [See Bluebook of the Jamestown Ter-Centennial Exposition (Norfolk: Colonial Publishing Co., 1909), p. 171].
5. Original plans and construction: The large basement was used as an armory and drill room for the First Separate Battalion -- the Negro branch of the D.C. National Guard -- until a new armory was built after World War I. The first floor was used originally and for many years as a fountain drug store. The second floor contained a large meeting room with balcony. Meeting rooms and offices were located on the third and fourth floors. (Conversation with Colonel West Hamilton, Washington, D.C., Jan. 10, 1978).
6. Alterations: The only major alteration to the exterior is the modernization, circa 1960, of the display windows and entrance doors on the first floor of the U Street facade.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Fraternal and mutual benefit organizations, such as the True Reformers and the Knights of Pythias, were important organizations for racial self-help and cooperation at the turn of the century. Discriminated against by white insurance companies, Afro-Americans turned to their mutual benefit societies for insurance. The dedication, on July 15, 1903, of the True Reformer Building was an event of great pride to the Negro community. To a large audience of fraternal dignitaries and Washington citizens, the National Grand Worthy Master, Dr. W. L. Taylor of Richmond, Va., said that he had wished to see

"a building that would reflect credit upon the Negro Race." (Burrell, op. cit., pp. 319-322). In the years to come the structure became a center of community activities. One of its offices housed the District of Columbia branch of the National Negro Business League (of which John A. Lankford was its first local president in 1905) organized by Booker T. Washington to encourage the development of Negro businesses. It was in the basement armory that the segregated black troops drilled prior to volunteering to go to the Arizona border during the Mexican-American crisis of 1916 and to Europe in 1917. The large second-floor balconied meeting room was the scene of basketball games and dances as well as meetings. (Conversation with Colonel West Hamilton, Washington, D.C., Jan. 10, 1978).

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views:

Lankford's Artistic Churches and Other Designs, Washington, D.C., 1924.

2. Bibliography:

Burrell, W. P. Twenty-Five Years History of the Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers, 1881-1905. Reprinted, Westport, Connecticut: Negro Universities Press, 1970. Pp. 319-322 give unusually complete details concerning the planning and financing of the Washington True Reformer Building.

Ethridge, Harrison M. "The Black Architects of Washington, D. C., 1900-Present." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1979. Pp. 3-21 discuss the career of John A. Lankford.

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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The True Reformer Building is an example of turn-of-the-century eclectic design that combined modified architectural features of classical revival and Romanesque architecture using stock architectural details. The dignified four-story building represents the Negro's effort at monumentality at the time Washington was being revitalized as a result of the McMillan Commission proposals.
2. Condition of fabric: The basement and first floor are in current commercial use, but the second, third, and fourth floors are in deteriorating condition. The exterior is in generally good condition, although sections of the pressed tin cornice are destroyed. Structurally the building appears to be sound.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Approximately 60' wide along U Street by 100' deep along Twelfth Street. The building is four stories tall and rectangular in shape, but with a four story indented light and air shaft along the west wall. The front facade is three bays wide in the upper two floors (with the windows grouped in twos between four pilasters).
2. Foundation: Brick, load bearing.
3. Wall construction, finish, and color: The north and east walls are covered in buff color pressed brick laid in a common bond without any rows of headers. The south and east walls are covered in an ordinary grade of red brick. The first floor U Street facade originally had four brick pilasters --- with an entrance located between each set of pilasters --- while the Twelfth Street facade still has its five brick pilasters. Each of these first floor pilasters had foliated capitals. Surmounting the top of the first floor pilasters and continuing around the two street facades is an entablature. The architrave, which has a terra cotta egg and dart molding, is surmounted by a modillioned tin cornice which acts as a sill for the second floor windows.

Beneath the third floor windows is a tin band that serves as a sill and is interrupted by the pilasters. This band is punctuated by modillions of a Romanesque character.

The first floor pilasters are repeated by another set of brick pilasters that extend from the second through the fourth floors. These pilasters are capped with modified Corinthian capitals. Surmounting these three-story pilasters is a wide decorative frieze of alternating pressed tin festoons, swags, and wreaths. Atop the frieze is a projecting tin cornice with modillions, which, in turn, is topped by a plain brick parapet, the simplicity of which is relieved only by projected sections that echo the pilasters below.

4. Structural system, framing: Exterior walls are load bearing. On each of the floors including the basement, are two sets of round 8" steel pipe columns that support steel beams that run north and south through the building. Wooden joists run east and west.
5. Chimney: There is one brick chimney located in the southwest corner of the building.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance --- now completely altered --- is located in the central bays of the U Street facade. Originally there were three front entrances: one between each set of pilasters. There is a side entrance near the center of the Twelfth Street facade. On the rear alley side are two entrances, one of which may not be original. On the Twelfth Street side is a wide window well running the length of the building and which can be reached by steps. The basement could originally be reached directly from the street by a doorway (now sealed) that opened off of this light well.
  - b. Windows: The U Street facade originally had projecting display windows on either side of each of the three entrances. Above these display windows were small transom-like windows set into the brick wall. On the Twelfth Street side was a series of small windows set above eye level, while windows opening into the light well lighted the basement.

On the second floor of the U Street side are three groups of two tall and narrow round-headed windows; on the Twelfth Street facade are three groups of three and one group of two tall and narrow round-headed windows. All of them are one-over-one pane double hung sash. Each of the round-headed windows is surmounted by a plain but wide rounded finished stone hoodmold set flush with the brick. At the base of the rounded hoodmold is a wide band

of tin that forms a horizontal belt joining each of the windows and interrupted only by the projected brick pilasters. This rounded hoodmold with the interconnecting belt is reminiscent of a feature of some of the Romanesque Revival designs of the period.

Windows on the third and fourth floors of the U Street facade are one-over-one pane double hung sash, grouped in twos between the pilasters. On the Twelfth Street facade the windows are the same type, but grouped in threes.

7. Roof: Flat, but sloped from front to rear. Material unobserved.
8. Other features: Along with other old painted signs, the west wall still retains very visible traces of the sign "True Reformer Building."

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: Essentially one large room with six cast-iron support columns located at regular intervals in the center of the room. Near the center of the north side of the room (within a modern partition) can be seen the remains of the wide stairway that originally led to the center U Street entrance on the first floor. At the southwest corner is the original furnace room and coal bin. Evidence of the right and left first floor front entrances can be seen in the basement where the original cast-iron dead-light entrance plates of the splayed entrance areas are still in place in the ceiling of the vaulted area under the sidewalk.
- b. First floor: Essentially one large room, now partitioned, with six cast-iron pipe columns located in the center of the room. The store area of the first floor was probably originally reached from U Street through doors and a hallway in the center of the facade. In the original plan the front part of the first floor contained two stair areas and hallways --- one in each corner --- that opened onto U Street and gave access to the upper floors. The original stairways have been removed, and new stairways to the basement and second floor have been located along the west wall.



- c. Second floor: Arranged as a large meeting room approximately 53'-9" wide by 80'-10" long. Modern partitions in parts of the room destroy the original openness. On the south wall can be seen the outline of the original stage which was raised 29" above the floor. Behind the stage are three tall windows which were originally round-headed. Dressing rooms, reached from the auditorium by steps or from the stage, adjoined either side of the stage. Above the dressing rooms are small rooms reached from the balcony.

A horseshoe shaped balcony, the well of which measures 22'-8 1/2" by 56'-4", surrounds three sides of the room. The balcony and the floor above are supported by six cast-iron pipe columns that have decorative iron caps made in eight pieces and simple wooden bases. The ceiling height of the meeting room is 19'-10 3/4" high. The two long sections of the balcony have three stepped areas for seating, while the center balcony section has five stepped seating levels. The balcony, as well as the main floor of the auditorium, was originally reached by stairs in each of the north-side corners; only the stairs in the northwest corner remain. The second floor flooring is a hardwood.

- d. Third and fourth floors: These were originally identical to each other. Each floor was reached by a stairway in the northwest corner. A long hallway ran along the west side. On the west side of the back hall is located a lavatory, its window opening onto the light shaft. Along each side of the third and fourth floors were four office or meeting room suites. Off of the hallway three of the suites had a windowless ante-room (approximately 7'-7" by 17'-7") which opened into a room (approximately 36'-8" by 17'-7"). At the south end of the hall was a room which served as the ante-room for an even larger room than the others. Steel columns, conforming to the structural pattern below, stand in the center of some of the offices and ante-rooms. Floors are of pine.
2. Wall and ceiling finish: The first floor is covered with a patterned tin ceiling, circa 1830 art deco design. The ceilings and walls on the other floors are still covered with thin wooden lath and plaster.
3. Doorways and doors: The original doors are a stock paneled design, while the woodwork is a stock 7-3/4" wide design.

4. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Lighting: The building originally had gas as well as electric lighting. Evidence of both remains.
  - b. Plumbing: An original toilet, its wooden tank being wall-hung about eight feet on the wall, is in the second floor hall lavatory.
  - c. Heating: The building was originally heated by hot water. What may be the original furnace remains. Some original radiators exist.
- D. Site: The building is located at the southwest corner of U and Twelfth Streets. The U Street facade faces due north. The immediate area was once the bustling center of the most important Negro business area of the city and was surrounded by pleasant residential neighborhoods. The surrounding area is now generally decayed and often marred by vacant buildings and lots.

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